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Unitarian Horizons

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NOT A CYLINDER SKIPPING

ABOUT ten days before Easter I read in the morning newspaper that fire had seriously damaged one of our churches, within a few miles of Boston; and I sent a brief note to express my sympathy and inquire whether there was anything that could be done to help. The answer which came back was so characteristic and so truly reassuring that it deserves wide circulation. It was

written by a layman, and read substantially as follows:

"Your kind letter regarding the fire in our Church was of much encouragement to us all; but really the fire was played up a little too much in the papers. As you know, the Easter service was held as usual, and the strong smell of smoke was only a reminder of the fate awaiting all Unitarians—in the future.

"The insurance adjustments are complete. Work is starting this week, and not a cylinder in our motor is skipping."

A FIRST-CLASS RISK

THOSE two short paragraphs tell much about the church from which they came. They show, for example, in the phrase about prompt settlement of insurance claims, that the business side of the church is in competent hands. But the chief element in the picture is the spirit of vigorous reaction to disaster, even though it was not so serious as first reports indicated. The machinery of that church is not easily thrown out of order, and minor repairs are quickly made. A little thing like a fire doesn't interrupt for more than a few minutes, and its only effect upon the morale of the church is to quicken its sense of humor. The strong smell of smoke, under such circumstances, is a better sign

of spiritual health than waves of fragrant incense before a high altar. If I were in the business of insuring churches against the baneful effects of discouragement and spiritual smugness, I should rate this particular church (which, by the way, is in Brockton, Massachusetts) as a thoroughly first-class risk.

NOT AN ISOLATED EXAMPLE

FROM the point of view of churches, disaster may come in a wide variety of forms. One of our New England churches was threatened, within twenty-four hours, by fire, flood, and hurricane; and the general observation that troubles seldom come singly is as true of churches as of individuals. In a period of two years, I have seen churches meet disasters of many kinds, from without and from within; and while it would not be true to say that they have all met the test with equal courage and good humor, what has most impressed me is the high quality of their faith in moments of trial. The church in Brockton is not an isolated example. On the contrary, it is typical.

It is easier, undoubtedly, to meet the threat of disaster when it comes in visible and dramatic form than when it creeps silently into the life of a church. There is enough of the small boy left in almost all adults to respond eagerly to an alarm of

fire, but it takes the insight of a Robert Frost to see and respond to "the slow and smokeless burning of decay". Faith is more severely tested by a flat calm than by a hurricane, and it is very much harder to keep morale high during a long war of attrition than during a terrific sudden assault.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR MORALE

IN a church, the primary responsibility for holding up the morale seems to me to lie with the minister. That is his first obligation. He may have his moments of profound discouragement, but he must not let his people know. He is the spiritual leader of the parish, and he must not waver in that leadership. When he speaks to his people, there must be no sign of faltering in his voice or his message. His trumpet must not give an uncertain sound. The flag which he has raised to the peak must not come down. His faith must be clear and steady in the sight of every man, woman, and child who looks to him for help. Only those who have tried to meet the exacting demands of spiritual leadership in a time of discouragement can fully realize the cost. Jacob, wrestling with the angel all night, is a legendary figure; but any minister who is worth his salt knows the hard truth behind the story. For many a minister, during the last twenty years, there has

been no blessing at dawn to assure him that the victory was won; but, even so, there has been little faltering, and very few surrenders. The record of the ministry during the years since 1918 is one that brings a deep sense of pride to anyone who belongs to the profession which, above all others—as Professor George Herbert Palmer wrote to me when I was entering it—is "the soldiers' profession".

SHARING THE RESPONSIBILITY

YES, the responsibility for maintaining the morale of a church falls primarily upon the minister; but it can be shared, and very often is shared, by laymen and laywomen within the parish. The letter from Brockton, as I pointed out earlier, was written by a layman; and even if a church is without a minister, that sort of lay leadership will go far toward holding up its morale. In the parish which I myself know best, the responsibility for keeping the flag flying has been shared over and over again, in times of special stress and in the more trying days of necessary delay and retrenchment, by lay leaders whose courage would have made it impossible for the minister to let his own discouragement be seen.

I often wonder whether the men and women who thus share the responsibility of their minister have any real idea of the value of what they are

doing—its value to the church, and its value to the minister. My guess is that a layman would be completely surprised—and not a little embarrassed—if his minister should say to him, "You know, back in the spring of 1936 I was just about ready to quit. It seemed to me that I had used up every last drop of energy and courage, and I felt drained to the point of absolute exhaustion. Then one day I ran into you on the street, and you took me to lunch. We talked about all sorts of things. I don't remember any of the details. But I do remember that somehow you made me terribly ashamed of my own lack of courage; and I went back to my job with a wholly new spirit. I don't suppose you knew what you had done for me, and I am sure you didn't do it deliberately. But I have long wanted to tell you that it made all the difference, and that I am very grateful".

MAKING YOUR MINISTER

OF course, the plain fact is that any minister is largely the product of his parish. It is easy to forget this, and to talk and think as though the minister would be just what he is in any church—just as successful or unsuccessful, just as good or poor a preacher, just as wise or unwise a counsellor, just as assiduous or lazy, in whatever place he might have found himself. Sometimes I have to listen to laymen who tell me

that their minister "isn't the same man we called two years ago", and they usually seem very much astonished by the discovery. But how could he be "the same man"? Inevitably, even two years in a parish will change a minister—sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. He cannot help changing, and the direction of the change will be largely determined by the way he is treated by his people—by their demands, their expectations, their courtesies, their forgetfulness, their open-mindedness, their sympathy, their criticisms, their flattery, their good sense, their generosity, their reserve, their indifference, their affection and loyalty.

A church can kill a minister with kindness, or with coolness. A church can spoil a minister by being a party to the easy, superficial success that has no solid basis of real difficulties bravely and patiently overcome. A church can break a minister by indulging in petty criticisms and unfair comparisons. A church can degrade a minister by treating him like a hired servant and unnecessarily keeping him close to the starvation level—financially and spiritually.

Or—a church can build up its minister into a true servant of mankind and God. It requires patience, and courage, and kindness. Patience, to listen and understand and wait; courage, to speak out in defence and in helpful criticism; kindness, to create the bonds of mutual confidence and good-

will that hold minister and people together. A church can even make its minister a great preacher —not, perhaps, by popular standards, but by the true measure of greatness in the pulpit, by the standards that Father Taylor would have recognized, or Robert Collyer, or Dr. Hale. Best of all, a church can make its minister a power for personal and social and civic righteousness such as he himself could never have become—or dared to dream of becoming—alone.

F. M. E.

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FREDERICK M. ELIOT, *President* PARKER E. MAREAN, *Treasurer*

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